

Climate change: why does spirituality matter?

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From being a topic for experts and “eccentrics” in the 1970s and 1980s, in the 21st century climate change is a reality affecting millions of people in the world. It has almost become fashionable to refer to climate change, with the risk of forgetting the horrible consequences communities are experiencing in various parts of the world: rise of temperature, severe droughts and floods, rise of sea level, among others, making people flee their homelands, as we heard at this panel.

IPCC reports showed undoubtedly the scientific basis for affirming that climate change is caused by human behaviour and the narrow window of opportunity the international community has for preventing even major dramatic consequences of climate change. The Anthropocene era we have entered in has started an unprecedented age where climate induced migration is one of the crucial aspects of the crisis and new forms of solidarity (between humans but also with non-human beings) are needed to face the challenges.

The rationale of this side event expresses that “States and the international community as a whole are required to give an urgent and immediate response, reflecting the spirit of a new international solidarity.” And some paragraphs later, “(the) scope of the parallel event is also to share our spiritual approach on the topic”.

It might seem strange that faith communities address the topic of climate change. From a Christian perspective, from where I speak, the Bible doesn’t speak about “climate change” *per se*. However, Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that the whole world has been created by God, and in the first book of the Bible we read that the human being has been placed on earth to “take work and take care of it” (Gen 2, 15 - NIV).

Taking “care for our common home” was the title of Pope Francis encyclical *Laudato si’* in 2015 which had a tremendous impact well beyond the Catholic community. Notions such as integral ecology (§ 137 – 162) and ecological spirituality (§202 – 246) are proposed as key concepts to address the crisis. Other Christian churches and leaders, notably the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, have earlier referred to the challenge posed by climate change.¹

For more than thirty years Christian churches in the ecumenical movement and other faith traditions have been addressing the matter. Strong interfaith declarations have shown the common approach religions and spiritualities have to this issue. To mention some of them: the 2008 Manifesto from the Uppsala Interfaith Climate Summit, convened by the Archbishop of Sweden, Anders Wejryd, the 2014 Interfaith Statement on Climate Change from the New York Summit organized by the World Council of Churches and Religions for Peace.²

1 Pope Francis, *Laudato si’, Care for our common home*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015. See G. Kerber, *Latin American and Ecumenical Insights in Laudato Si’*, *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 70, Number 4, December 2018, p. 627-636.

2 For these and other interfaith statements, see Ignatius Rautenbach, Guillermo Kerber, Christoph Stückelberger (eds.) *Religions for Climate Justice. International Interfaith Statements 2008-2014*, Geneva, Globethics 2014. Online version available at globethics.net

Last week in Wuppertal, Northern Germany, more than fifty participants coming from Africa, the Americas Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific, recalled some of the basis of a spiritual approach to climate change. The so called Wuppertal call acknowledges:

“Although humans have not contributed equally to the root causes of this crisis, as Christians we come together to confess our complicity and bondage to sin:

- We have been arrogant in assuming that the whole earth centres around us humans and our needs (pride).
- We have become trapped in an abysmal desire for unlimited material growth, driven by a pervasive culture of consumerism (greed).
- We have exploited God’s gifts, resorted to violence against God’s creatures and violated human dignity (violence).
- We have become alienated from ancestral land and indigenous wisdom, from animals as our co-creatures and from Earth as our God-given home (the privation of the good).
- We have been overcome by folly, injustice, denial and greed (vice).
- We have been slow in coming to terms with our responsibility to address the defining crisis of our age (sloth).”

Considering this critical situation, the Wuppertal Call affirms that “At the heart of the required transformation is a need for ecological conversion (*metanoia*), a change of heart, mind, attitudes, daily habits and forms of praxis (Rom. 12:1-2).” This echoes *Laudato si’*, which called for an ecological conversion (LS § 216 – 221).

When we are acquainted with the science of climate change, in an age of anxiety and despair, pessimism and hopelessness might be the direct consequences. However, faith communities proclaim the courage to hope. “In the face of economic and political narratives that distort our understanding of proper relationships between humans, creation and Creator, such hope may seem counter-intuitive. The hope that we proclaim not only critiques oppressive and patriarchal systems of dominion but inspires us to participate in the healing of creation (2 Chron. 7:14). Hope is not the same as blind optimism that trusts in the mere extension of current trends. Such hope is not cheap; it is costly. It springs forth despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary because it rests in the Triune God. It is such hope that encourages us and compels us towards a comprehensive ecological transformation of society.” (Wuppertal call)

While stressing this spiritual dimension³, faith traditions are convinced that together with individual changes the climate crisis and its consequences require bold political will and binding agreements to effectively address it. Neither individual lifestyle changes alone nor an ambitious legal framework isolated suffice to be responsible to the legacy we will be leaving to our children and grandchildren.

The intergenerational justice dimension of the crisis calls for courageous actions at both layers as a complementary expression of solidarity responding both to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

3 G. Kerber, *Caring for Creation and Striving for Climate Justice: Implications for mission and spirituality*, in *International Review of Mission*, Vol 99-2, November 2010.